

U.S. Rep. John Campbell has plans to draw up federal legislation this spring that would give Newport Beach control of lower Newport Harbor.

Campbell said he would have to obtain an estimate on what would be a fair price for the waterway before he drafts the bill — city officials want the federal government to give them about \$12 million for taking over responsibility of the waterway, he said.

“What we need is a determination of fair market value, something that’s fair for the city and the taxpayers,” Campbell said.

The lower harbor is under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps Of Engineers, because it contains a federal navigation channel, but the channel is viewed by the Corps as more of a recreational area than a vital waterway, Newport Beach City Manager Homer Bludau said.

The city views the potential jurisdiction swap as a way to secure funding to continue a much-needed dredging of the harbor, or a way to make a fair swap with the Corps in exchange for completing the dredging, he said.

“The problem is that the project is not a high priority for Army Corps because they see it more as a recreation harbor than a navigation harbor,” Bludau said. “We’re trying to give them some incentive to complete the project by saying, ‘Do it now, and we’ll relieve you of any future responsibility.’”

Newport Harbor hasn’t been thoroughly dredged in more than 70 years.

Boaters complain of running aground, and an estimated 900,000 cubic yards of sediment need to be removed.

The project could cost up to \$18 million over the next 20 years, according to one city estimate.

The dredging secured some preliminary funding through the federal earmarking process in December, but the city could end up seeing only \$1 million or \$2 million in federal money devoted to the dredging, if any.

The dredging could end up costing even more if funds run dry and the Corps is forced to stop in the middle of the process, Campbell said.

“If they stop, it’s very, very expensive to start back up again,” he said.

The city met with an Army Corps of Engineers representative in October to identify possible sources of funding to continue the project.

The city had about \$13 million left to finish it late last year.

Campbell also met with Army Corps of Engineers officials earlier this week to ask the agency to budget money for the harbor clean up, he said.

Bludau said the possibility of securing more funding from the Corps is unlikely.

“The Corps hasn’t gotten the funding they have been seeking for a number of years, and they have been weighing the importance and prioritization of its projects.”